

THE DAY THE WORLD TURNED RED

A REPORT ON THE PEOPLE OF UTRIK



K A I E R I K S O N

Colin Woodard, writing for *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* in 1998, put it well. The Marshall Islands, he noted, is

composed of more than 1,100 of the smallest, flattest, most fragile, numerous, and remote islands one can imagine — glorified sandbars anchored to coral reefs by stands of coconut and pandanus, surrounded by bright blue water. They're scattered among 29 coral atolls, perched along their narrow rings like beads in an irregular necklace. . . . The atolls in turn are spread over three-quarters of a million miles of the central Pacific, thousands of miles from a major land mass. Add all the Marshall's dry land together and it's about the size of the District of Columbia.

Bikini and Utrik are two of those atolls, separated by 275 miles of open sea.

Spring 1954

On 6:45 on the morning of 1 March 1954, a thermonuclear device code-named “Bravo” was detonated seven feet above the surface of

one of the islands that made up Bikini atoll. The island simply disappeared. Bravo had an explosive power two and a half times greater than its designers had expected, and one thousand times greater than the bomb that had destroyed Hiroshima eleven years earlier. It was the largest detonation on record.

When Americans relate the story, they note that Bravo was one of sixty-seven test shots – all of them above ground – touched off on Bikini and Enewetok in the Marshall Islands between 1946 and 1958. That number represents just 14 percent of the nuclear tests conducted by the United States, but it was responsible for something like 80 percent of the radioactivity generated by those tests. We Americans learned early to locate our most virulent adventures a long way from home. Bravo had ten times the explosive power of all the above-ground nuclear tests conducted in the United States proper.

It became clear in the days leading up to Bravo that local winds were beginning to shift in ominous ways, threatening to endanger islanders living downwind from the blast. No effort was made to postpone the test. The most benign telling of that part of the story suggests that meteorological data were not processed properly as they moved up the chain of command and so never reached the people in a position to act on the matter. But an alternative telling suggests that the changed wind patterns offered a providential and almost irresistible opportunity on the part of the United States to learn something about the effects of radiation on human flesh – a subject about which scientists of the day knew very little. Most of the data then available had come from laboratory mice.

Years later, a Marshallese representative to the Congress of Micronesia said, referring to two atolls downwind from the Bravo test: “The U.S. knowingly and consciously allowed the people of Rongelap and Utrik to be exposed so that the U.S. could use them as guinea pigs.” That quote is not a part of the American telling of the story, of course, but about twenty years later, Representative George Miller, chair of a House subcommittee that had held hearings on the matter, wrote to President Bill Clinton and Secretary Hazel O’Leary of the Department of Energy that the people of the Marshall Islands had been “deliberately exposed to nuclear fallout.”

Even if one's sense of conspiracy is not up to so dramatic a conclusion, it is easy to see that the climate of those times did not engender a strong sense of concern for the islanders. An official of the Atomic Energy Commission, the agency that had conducted the tests, said in a meeting of the Commission – knowing that his comments were being recorded – that one of the exposed islands “is by far the most contaminated place on earth, and it will be interesting to go back and get good data. . . . Data of this type has never been available. While it is true that these people do not live the way Westerners do – civilized people – it is nevertheless also true that they are more like us than mice.” This is a good person trying to bring some humor into the conversation, perhaps. It was a joke. Sort of. But it reflects the mood of the time in ways he probably never intended. When the Marshallese learned about that remark later, of course, they thought they knew exactly what it meant.

There is no question about what happened the day of the bomb. A snowstorm of fallout – particles of coral from Bikini atoll, pulverized to an almost weightless powder and alive with radioactivity – drifted eastward. At 100 miles it encountered a Japanese trawler named *Lucky Dragon* with 23 persons on board. At 130 miles it crossed over Rongelap, home of 64 islanders. At 150 miles it passed over the island of Rongelik, the permanent home of scores of islanders and the temporary home of 28 American weather observers. At 275 miles, finally, it reached Utrik, where 159 persons then lived.

In the days following, people who had been in the path of Bravo were evacuated at a pace that could only be called leisurely. The *Lucky Dragon* steamed north toward home, soon to discover that it was not well named. The American observers on Rongelik were flown out a half day after the blast, well in advance of the island's natives. The people of Rongelap were evacuated after two days, and the residents of Utrik after three. Humans can absorb massive dosages of radioactivity in that amount of time.

Nothing was said about the event by U.S. authorities until a laconic bulletin was issued quite some time afterward: “During the course of routine atomic tests in the Marshall Islands 28 U.S. personnel and 236 residents were transported to Kwajalein Island.

These persons were unexpectedly exposed to some radioactivity. There were no burns. All are reported well. They will be returned to their homes.”

Thus the American telling of the story.

The people of Utrik knew nothing of Hiroshima or nuclear tests or Bikini or anything of the kind, and they relate the story in a more direct way. All they knew on 1 March was that an astonishing eruption shook the narrow strip of coral on which they lived and that the sky itself seemed to explode. Witnesses remembered “a bright light” that “looked like a second sun coming up” and something that “sounded like thunder, but . . . was very, very loud.” “I was climbing a coconut tree when the bomb exploded,” said one man, “and when I looked at my skin it had turned red. When I looked around everything had turned red.” “After a while” added another, “we could see powder falling from the sky. It was like when you throw flour up in the sky and it falls back down. It was like that.” Yet another eyewitness noted: “The sky was very bright red. On the morning of the bomb I was on Aon Island [an unoccupied fragment of island in the Utrik atoll], and I saw the red sky and heard the sound of loud thunder. We were very frightened and tried to hide on the island.”

Only a few of those who were on the island at the time are now alive to speak of it, but it is striking to realize so many years later that the narratives of persons who were not yet born on that fateful day can sound almost exactly like the narratives of those who experienced it firsthand. It can be as fresh and as searing a memory for those who heard about it from the elders as it is for the elders themselves. One person said in an interview: “The sky turned red and powder came down and fell all over our bodies. It was itchy and irritable.” The use of the pronoun “our” and the immediacy of the language itself makes the comment sound like an eyewitness account, but the speaker was born eleven years after the bomb and is only relating what she had been told. Still, that “our” is not a slip of the tongue or some form of confusion, because “the bomb” — that is how everyone speaks of it — really *is* her experience. It was the most decisive moment in her history, the most decisive event in her world, and in that sense it *did* happen to her, as it did to so many others.

The people of Utrik had no idea what was happening to them, of course. Some of the children had seen drawings of white powder falling from the sky in religious tracts supplied by missionaries from Boston and sensed that they were in the presence of snow. They knew, too, from the same source, that snow was something one plays with. The adults, however, had a harder time of it. There were those who wondered whether a great new war had broken out. The islanders knew something of war because their homeland had been occupied first by the Japanese in World War II and then by the Americans. But many more feared that the end of the world was at hand. "I thought it was the day of Armageddon," said one. And another: "I thought it was the end of the world." That image, too, may owe more to the missionaries from Boston than to the traditional culture of Micronesia.

On the second day after the bomb, when the numbed people of Utrik still had no idea what had befallen them, some Americans arrived in a seaplane. They took samples of the soil, probed the ground with devices no one on the island had ever seen or knew the purpose of, and then left with a few terse words. On the third day a ship appeared to evacuate everyone from the island. The ship was too large to enter the calmer waters of the lagoon, protected by the circle of coral islets that form an atoll, so it had to anchor in the rougher waters of the ocean. "The men had to swim to the ship holding onto the sides of the dinghies," someone recalled, "while only the women and children could ride inside the dinghies," and when they made it to the ship, they had to crawl up a rope ladder to reach the deck. They were told that they could take nothing with them – no food, no clothing, no personal effects – and they were soon on their way to Kwajalein. They were wet, frightened, cold. They still had no idea about the fate that had been thrust upon them or how long their exile was likely to last. But they were beginning to understand – everything that occurred in the spaces surrounding them announced as much – that something truly terrible had happened to them.

The first days in Kwajalein produced their own sharp memories. The islanders were made to bathe in the lagoon with a strong soap, and they were hosed off when they came out of the water like cattle emerging from a chute. They were housed in roped-off compounds and were not allowed to see visitors. These were

sensible precautions, perhaps, even if performed with a callousness that no one who was there will ever forget, but the *meaning* of the scene was clear to them then and remains so to this day. They knew that they had been contaminated in some deep, elementary way, that they were now defective to the core of their being; and the fear became all the sharper because they were not told what it was. The Americans did not know what it was either, as it turned out, but they did not admit so, which only indicated to the islanders that what had happened to them was too horrible – literally – for words.

In addition, the islanders thought that they were not being treated with even the most cursory respect. They were herded this way and that by officials who probably knew no other way to handle so many people on such short notice, but the islanders did not (and could not) see those actions as the awkward discourtesies they were. By modern Western standards, the people of Utrik are exceptionally modest when it comes to exposing themselves. Two women remember:

We were given these flimsy boxer shorts and towels to go and wash ourselves in the lagoon. The shorts were flimsy and when you came out of the water you could see through as if you were naked. This is against our culture.

I remember that they made us bathe in the lagoon with a strong soap, and they made the women wear U.S. military-type men's underwear. When I think about that I feel really bad, because it is not our custom. They used to hose us off with water when we returned from bathing in the lagoon.

We were not treated like people.

This all added up to a feeling, still vivid after half a century, that they were being treated as if they were less than fully human, creatures of another kind – perhaps even of another species.

The people of Utrik returned home after a three month stay on Kwajalein to a world totally different from the one they had left. The island had once been alive with chickens and pigs – a small coral island has no need for fences – but the Americans had slaughtered them all and now warned the returning inhabitants not to eat the local food or drink the local water. No coconuts or

arrowroot or fish from the lagoon, no breadfruit or taro – nothing that grew on that strip of land. As a practical matter, the provisions left by the Americans were soon depleted, so the islanders had no choice but to turn to their traditional foodstuffs. But to ask them to avoid the bounty of their land was like asking them not to breathe. And the thought was beginning to grow among them that the Americans were not telling them the truth anyway.

In the decades that followed, the people of Utrik came into contact with a number of American scientists and physicians who came to the Marshalls to test and probe and measure and sometimes to arrange for the treatment of persons who developed thyroid cancer or other ailments that could be traced to radiation. I will not go into that story in any detail now, but the islanders, almost to a person, take it for granted that the Americans came not to treat them but to study them. Many of the visitors were in fact research scientists, whatever the graduate degrees that accounted for their being called “doctor,” and there was simply no question but that their main assignment was to learn what they could about the effects of radiation on living beings. The head of the research program, himself a physician, wrote that the “irradiated Marshallese people offers a most valuable source of data on human beings who have sustained injury from . . . exposure,” and, in any case, it was obvious to the islanders that they were seen not as patients but as objects of scientific curiosity. I asked a young man from Utrik what he would most want to say to the Nuclear Claims Tribunal (a term I will explain shortly) if he were to appear before it, and he said firmly: “If I could stand up and speak to the Tribunal, the first thing I would say is that the doctors have never told us the truth and that we don’t trust [them]. They come and study us like animals in an experiment. They have been taking samples from us, but never give us treatment. They have never told us the truth about our condition.” If time allowed, I could fill this page and several others with comments of the same sharpness and force. Two fragments will have to serve: “They came here because they wanted to study . . . how we got radiation in our bodies;” “They came here because they knew we were poisonous.”

The people of Utrik assumed, as most people on earth would be likely to, that “doctors” are in the business of healing. So they felt demeaned, even betrayed, by the physicians who came – treated

with a contempt usually reserved for creatures that are less than human. That feeling has persisted for all those years, lingering in their minds like yet another trace of poison.

Interlude

The Marshall Islands was assigned to the United States as a Trust Territory by the United Nations not long after the end of World War II. It became an independent republic in 1986. *Independent* is not a word used very often in the years since to describe relations between the new republic and United States, since the former continues for all practical purposes to be a protectorate of the latter. But it is essential for our purposes now to note that a settlement was arranged in 1986 for citizens of the new republic to drop all pending lawsuits involving the nuclear test program in return for a final settlement of \$150 million. A Nuclear Claims Tribunal was established to administer that fund – to hear claims from people of the affected atolls, and then to award compensation when the evidence warranted it.

The initial sum of \$150 million was quickly depleted as awards were made to people from Bikini, Rongelap, and elsewhere who had suffered from radioactive fallout. But the Tribunal has continued to hear claims in the years since and to offer compensation even though it no longer has funds at its disposal – in part because a sense of justice requires it and in part because there is always a dim hope that the U.S. Congress will honor those judgments.

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I was asked in early 2002 by an attorney representing the people of Utrik whether I would visit the island for a time, interview people who lived there, and testify on their behalf before the Tribunal. I had never been to that part of the world and knew almost nothing about the Marshallese. But I had spent a considerable part of my professional life visiting scenes of deep human distress, usually for the purpose of testifying about that distress in courts of law or other legal settings. It is probably worth my mentioning in passing that those scenes included a coal mining valley in West Virginia, an Ojibwa Indian Reserve in Ontario, the

nuclear power plant at Three Mile Island, a farmworker camp occupied by Haitian migrants at the edges of the Everglades in Florida, native villages along the southern shore of Alaska after the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, several communities elsewhere in the United States suffering from exposure to toxic contaminants of one kind or another, and a town in what was once called Yugoslavia destroyed by tides of civil war as the world rearranged itself after the fall of the Soviet Union. All but the last of those involved participation in a legal action.

I mention all this because I was being invited to testify not as an expert on the ways of the Marshallese people but as somebody with experience of the traumatic effects of disastrous events on individuals and on the communities they are part of.

I had two partners in this. The first was Robert Jay Lifton, with whom I have worked on a couple of the occasions noted above. We conferred about the interviews I would conduct at Utrik before I went, reviewed the various interview materials I brought back from the field, and drew a number of important comparisons between the survivors of Utrik and the survivors of Hiroshima in the report we filed with the Tribunal. The other was Glenn Alcalay, an anthropologist who served as Peace Corps volunteer in Utrik in the 1970s and had returned several times to the Marshall Islands on research errands of one kind or another in the years since. We took trips together to Majuro, the capital of the republic; to Ebeye, one of the islands of Kwajalein atoll; and, of course, to Utrik itself. He was my counselor and mentor in matters pertaining to Marshallese culture and history, and he was my interpreter when I talked to the people of Utrik, almost all of whom speak only Marshallese, as I speak only English. Alcalay has stories of his own to tell, and he has done so with great sensitivity and skill, so when I speak of “we” I am referring to the times when he accompanied me on my research rounds and not of the work he was engaged in at the same time.

If this essay could include photographs, they would portray makeshift shacks scattered at leisurely intervals across the surface of the island – modern replacements for the huts woven of coconut fronds that had been the traditional shelters of the Marshallese for all the time that people know how to measure. Those shacks can be ingenious structures, cobbled together from the oddments that

navies often leave in their path – packing cases, oil drums, corrugated tins – and other useful scraps of this and that. As we sat in the shade of a tree talking to people, chickens and dogs and pigs that looked at me as fast as greyhounds scurried by, picking up whatever was left on the ground. They leave the island as clean as if it had been groomed by a vacuum cleaner. Every now and then a young man would lope by, notice the pale stranger sitting there, and without a word scale a nearby tree as quickly and as effortlessly as he moved across the surface of the ground to fetch me a coconut for the milk in it. I sat one day with two widowed sisters, both in their late eighties (I was into my seventies by then) who took turns inviting me with contagious laughter to come a’ courtin’ later when the sun went down and a cooler wind began to stir.

And yet that evening, as Alcalay and I sat at an outside table under the only lightbulb in all Utrik, powered by a generator, a procession of women came out of the darkness singing to us in a soft, hauntingly beautiful chorus and carrying a feast large enough to feed thirty or more persons – which, later, is just what it did. This was a traditional welcome, known in other parts of the Pacific, but the words spoken as the food was laid out had a special edge to them: this is the best fare we are able to prepare for you, but, alas, like everything else on the island, it is poison. We ate it anyway. So did they. But a dread reality had been asserted that has become the bedrock on which life in Utrik lies.

The task at hand was to serve as a witness to that dread reality and to portray it in terms that fit the prevailing logic of a court hearing. It is always in part an act of translation when the ways in which the people of a particular culture experience and express the pains that life has dealt them are rephrased in the cadences of American law and presented as evidence. The best way for me to convey that now, probably, will be to draw on the conclusions I offered at the Tribunal a month or two later when I appeared before it. I will not need to depend on memory here: the testimony itself began as a written report.

In that report, as would have been the case if it were a professional paper, I was careful to note the size of the “sample” I had been in touch with, the persons from whom I learned the information I passed on to the Tribunal. I undertook recorded interviews with thirty-five persons on Utrik and with a handful of other

persons from Utrik who now live in Majuro or Ebeye. That number included eleven persons who were living in Utrik at the time of “the bomb” and who were still there at the time of my visit. In addition, I was able to study the transcripts of interviews conducted by others over the years, some of them the work of Glen Alcalay. I point this out because I am going to try to claim now, as I did to the Tribunal (and would have had to if this were a technical research report), that I had been in touch with a large enough portion of the relevant population for me to speak about it in general terms.

Poisoned Bodies

The people of Utrik, almost to a person, take it for granted that their bodies have been invaded by potentially lethal doses of radiation, and that those traces of “poison” – that is the word they use in everyday speech – continue to reside inside them like a hidden malignancy, ready to harm not only themselves but the children and grandchildren they bring into the world. This feeling is so deep and so compelling that it reaches far beyond what clinical specialists normally have in mind when they refer to post-traumatic stress disorder or depression or other pathological states of mind. And it is so general and so pervasive that it can be said to have become a part of the overall community ethos, an element of local culture, as well as a clinical condition. It is a dread they can never escape, that they and their kind may be doomed. Experts have observed that dread elsewhere. It is a feeling that moves out from the separate recesses of individual minds to become an essential feature of the way life is understood and lived in the social order more generally. I called this “the traumatic worldview” in research I conducted in similar settings, and I would argue that it fits the condition of everyday life in Utrik very well. It is an assumption that has worked its way into the grain of the culture itself: “poison” lurks everywhere.

Poison makes itself known to victims by damaging the tissues it invades, so the people of Utrik quite naturally list the ailments from which they suffer when they are asked what “the bomb” has done to them. Some of the ailments they mention are familiar to specialists – what they have learned to expect from populations

exposed to radiation. If one person notes that “I have had five thyroid surgeries and will have surgery soon again,” and another points out that “I have been to Honolulu three times for thyroid surgery,” no one is likely to challenge the suggestion that the ailment may have “come from radiation.” The relationship between that cause and that effect is well established.

But the people of Utrik complicate things by referring to ailments that are not usually associated with radiation in the Western way of reckoning such things. One often encounters those who say things like “I have pains in my legs; I think they are related to the bomb.” Or those who connect very different conditions in their listing of what the bomb has done to them. (Here, as elsewhere in this report, each separate paragraph represents a different speaker, and the words in parentheses are questions being asked.)

I think my mother was radioactive from the bomb. (*How did the radioactivity show up?*) She had her thyroid removed two different times, and she had her leg amputated due to an infection. (*Was the infection caused by the bomb?*) Yes, I believe so.

I have an eighteen-year-old son. One of his testes did not descend properly. They had to operate. (*Do you think that came from the bomb?*) Yes, I believe it comes from having lived in Utrik and eaten the foods.

Reports of this kind are heard everywhere, and they can be exasperating to visitors from parts of the world where a particular insult to bodily tissues and a particular set of symptoms that result from it are thought to be closely connected. But the essential point to keep in mind here is that the people of Utrik view *themselves* as so weakened, so damaged, so impaired by the effects of the bomb that they are now subject to virtually all the troubles to which flesh is heir. In that sense, a true medical audit of the people of Utrik would not involve drawing up rosters of specific illnesses that appear to be common among them but to declare that a general sense of infirmity and defectiveness is *itself* the most significant medical consequence – as well as the most significant social and cultural consequence – of the bomb. Exposure to radiation, that is, and the deep dread that accompanies it, has left them

feeling vulnerable and defenseless, and because that is the case conditions as unlike as high blood pressure and cancer of the thyroid, arthritis and leukemia, sore knees and difficulty breathing are all viewed as evidence of an underlying constitutional impairment. How physicians trained in Western medicine would be expected to deal with such things during a routine office visit is beyond me, but there are no physicians or office hours on Utrik – nothing other than a kind and vulnerable people trying to come to terms with a terrible visitation from some distant place that has injured them in ways they do not understand. It is worth noting, even if we can do so only in passing, that similar patterns of reasoning have been found in a number of other places in the world where people have reason to suppose that they have been contaminated by something invisible and noxious.

It is clear from the list of medical complaints that islanders provide in interviews that a feeling of being less than whole, of being made up of damaged stuff, occupies the core of their being. Imagine that in the course of a day's interviewing you hear people offering the following roster of ailments that they attribute to the bomb.

I have many problems and pains all over. My stomach always hurts. I have high blood pressure and poor kidneys.

I have a heart murmur, diabetes, high blood pressure, everything.

[My parents] developed a skin rash and they have much pain in their bodies. And they are not as vital and now feel much weaker after the bomb.

[My children] are getting weaker and fatigued. Their bodies are not as vibrant as before.

My life is not very good. I don't feel well. I feel weak all the time.

(So the sicknesses that you described to me – the heart problem, the diabetes, the high blood pressure, the mass in the throat – what do you think is the cause of them?) I believe it is the result of the bomb. *(All of them or just some of them?)* Most probably all of them.

And there it is. People have “pains all over.” They “feel weak and feeble.” They suffer from “shortness of breath,” “numbness,” “fatigue,” and “loss of vibrancy.” Their children are “not growing up right,” and they, having aged almost half a century, “feel weaker” than they did before.

The logic of Western medicine, of course, directs that we draw a line here somewhere. A mass in the throat may well be a result of radiation. High blood pressure is less likely to be. But it is important for visitors to appreciate that the logic of Western medicine can take us only so far, since the best trained and most confident of physicians can rarely say to islanders with the assurance that is generally expected of them that this condition or that *cannot be* a product of radiation. One can speak of probabilities here but not of anything approaching certainties. We do not know that much.

The logic of the islanders takes a different form. If people are suffering from ailments that were not known before the coming of the bomb, then the bomb must have been their cause. This is not how Western epidemiologists are invited to reckon as they go about their research, but it is deeply rational all the same in human terms and would make compelling sense to most persons in the world. The people of Utrik were made different on the first day of March 1954, and they quite naturally trace the source of that difference back to what happened on that day. The comments one hears have a familiar, almost rehearsed, cadence, but this is because they reflect a common understanding, an article of cultural lore. “I believe this all comes from the bomb, as we didn’t have those kinds of illness before.” “Before the fallout, people didn’t have those kinds of sickness.” “Only after the bomb did we have these illnesses.”

It is important to note in this connection that radiation and other forms of toxicity have a character all their own in human thinking. They are invisible and invasive. We cannot see them, smell them, hear them, feel them, or sense them in any other way. They work their way stealthily into the tissues of the body and into the texture of everyday life. There is a substantial body of evidence in the behavioral and social sciences that radiation in particular has a special capacity to nourish dread in people everywhere. Nor is that hard to understand.

For one thing, disasters that involve radiation have no frame. Most events we come to classify as disasters seem to follow the classical rules of plot: they have a beginning, a middle, and an end. An alarm sounds the beginning. It is a signal to retreat, to take to storm cellars, to move to higher ground, to crouch in the shelter of whatever cover presents itself. A period of destruction then follows that may take no more than a brief, shattering moment or many last a number of days. Sooner or later, though, the disaster comes to an end. The floodwaters recede, the smoke clears, the winds abate, and an all-clear is sounded either literally or figuratively. An announcement is then heard that the emergency is over and that the time has now arrived for clearing and restoration. The pain may last for a long time; dreams may continue to haunt and wounds prove hard to heal. But the disaster itself is over. It takes its place in history according to the dates on which it is thought to have occurred. 1 March 1954. That is how the American story of Bravo is told.

Radioactive disasters, however – and what happened to Utrik certainly qualifies as that – violate all rules of plot. Some of them have clearly defined beginnings, as was obviously the case here. But they never end. Those invisible contaminants remain a constant of life. They are absorbed into the landscape, into the tissues of the body, and, worst of all, into the genetic material of the survivors. The danger lingers inside the body itself, continuing to do harm from within, and in that sense the disaster is still in progress. The book of accounts is never closed. That is how the people of Utrik experience it. “The bomb” was not really a moment in a time now past. It is a continuing event, a part of the present – as if the storm were still ranging, the earthquake still in effect, the fire not yet extinguished.

Many of the islanders who have been interviewed were born long after the date of the Bravo shot and thus were not – an odd expression, as I shall suggest in a moment – “exposed.” But the people of Utrik are quite clear how those who never encountered any direct fallout from Bravo nonetheless came to be damaged by it. Some might not be able to explain the science of genetic inheritance in any detail, but they know perfectly well, as one mother put it, that “if I have radiation in my body, then I may pass it on to my children,” and they know, too, that the same will be true for their

children's children and maybe for generations yet to follow. With or without the help of genetic processes, moreover, the poison passes from mother to child in the most natural way possible. One can only try to imagine the sorrow and the resignation of a mother who fears – and who has no choice but to fear – that she is passing pollutants on to her just-born children in the very act of nursing them.

Far and away the most frequently cited way for the poisons to be transmitted to those who did not experience the initial fallout, however, is eating the food, drinking the water, and even breathing the air of Utrik itself. The following are but three voices from a whole chorus:

(How did [your parents] get those illnesses if they were not there at the time of the bomb?) Because they lived there and ate the foods there on Utrik.

All of my children have had rashes on their forearms, as well as headaches and body pain. *(Do you think those things came from the bomb?)* Yes. *(How do you think they got those illnesses?)* I believe the illnesses came from drinking the water in the wells in addition to eating the food in Utrik.

I had a child born in 1988 with a very large head and water in the brain. We couldn't tell whether it was a boy or a girl. *(What happened to that child?)* The baby was born prematurely and died. The [American] doctors said it was not related to the bomb, but they didn't explain anything to me. . . . *(Deep in your heart, what do you think?)* I believe this was a result of the poison on Utrik, of my having lived on Utrik and eaten the foods. In my mind this is clear.

It is impossible to say how many births belonging to that same dread category have taken place in Utrik over recent years. Births there are rarely if ever assisted by a physician, and autopsies are simply unknown. But tales of strange and alarming births have been reported regularly and have to be listened to with care, for almost every one of them is counted by the parents as having been a result of the bomb.

My first baby was born without any bones. Like this piece of paper. It was flimsy.

Nerik gave birth to something resembling the eggs of a sea turtle, and Flora gave birth to something very sticky, like a jellyfish.

I gave birth to a baby after seven months' pregnancy. It did not have any skin.

Some were born without legs or arms. Some had no eyes.

I saw three different women give birth to strange things after the bomb. One was like the bark from a coconut tree. One was a watery mess that was not humanlike.

These comments have to be read not as contributions to an ongoing medical record but as a gathering of insights into the way the world looks and acts and feels in the wake of a disaster like the one that visited Utrik.

Poisoned Lands

So the people of Utrik are entirely convinced that their island home is permeated with contaminants. This includes the ground under their feet, the vegetation that grows on it, the waters of the sea that surrounds it, and the dead coral reefs that form the bottom of the lagoon. It includes the foods they eat and the water they drink and cook in. Few of them entertain any hope that their living space will become less lethal with the passing of years, certainly not in time to be of much help to their children or to future generations following upon them (unless some comprehensive cleanup is attempted, which is another story for another time).

It is a common figure of speech, as I remarked earlier, to refer to persons who were in Utrik at the time of the fallout as "exposed." The islanders use that expression too, but it does not reflect their sense of the order of things at all well. "Exposure" is a constant of everyday life, and for two reasons. First, people are exposed on a continuing basis to the radiation they assume to be absorbed in the tissues of their own bodies, and, second, they are exposed on a continuing basis to the radiation they assume to be lodged in the environmental spaces around them. They are beset by poisons from within and poisons from without.

It is important to appreciate in this connection what land

means in the Marshall Islands (and the rest of Micronesia). Land is not only scarce as a matter of simple fact. It is essential to a person's sense of wholeness and well-being as a matter of cultural belief. Glenn Alcalay cites an old saying: "A Marshallese without land is no Marshallese at all." That is equivalent to saying, "A person without land is no person at all." People without any land will continue to exist as clumps of living tissue, of course, but they see themselves, and are seen by others, as something less than complete human beings and without standing in the community. Land is what gives one location and stature and whatever measure of security one can attain. It is, as one Marshallese said, "a living thing that is a part of our soul."

When one's land is befouled, then, it is like an injury to the family, a wound to the self. That is the context we need to have in mind when we listen to what people have to say about what has happened to their natural surroundings. It is also what we need to have in mind when we raise the inevitable question, "Why don't you go elsewhere, then?" That is the bind. People are fully persuaded that the place they live in is damaging them, and yet they find it very difficult to imagine life apart from the land that bears their name and on which they were born. The first speaker here is an eighty-eight-year-old woman and the others are an assortment of neighbors:

I will never more from here, because this is the place I love. This is where my land is. I would be lost not to live on my land.

Yes, I have thought of leaving. But where would I go? This is the only place where I have land.

This place is contaminated, but it is hard for me to leave here, my home island, where I was born and raised.

This is my land, and I do not want to be exiled to another country. This is my dignity, my ancestors' land. I grew up here.

There is an undertone in all this that others have noticed in addition to myself. If there is a sense in which the people of Utrik are joined to their land – are of a piece with their land – then

there is a sense in which they are contaminated no matter where they reside. If the land is a part of you, then you bear its taints everywhere.

The testimony I have been drawing on here moved to other subjects before the hearing came to a close, but these are the main points I wanted to share in this account. I propose now to end with two concluding comments. The first is a version of the final remarks I offered to the Tribunal. I called it an Afterword in my written testimony then, and I shall do so now. The other is a brief, one-paragraph report on the findings of the Tribunal as they came out four and a half years later.

Afterword

When I appeared before the Tribunal, I did so as an “expert witness” on behalf of the people of Utrik, who had brought a class-action claim for damages occurring as a result of the fallout of 1954. The proceedings of the Tribunal are borrowed from American legal tradition. The three judges sit at a table facing the courtroom. An officer known as the Defender of the Fund is appointed to serve the role played in American courts by a defense attorney: his job (it was a he in this case) is to contest the arguments made by the claimants and in that way to protect what was once a fund against unreasonable claims. It was the Defender’s job, then, to recruit witnesses to counter the testimony of those retained by the claimants.

In pursuing that assignment, the Defender of the Fund obtained written testimony from a team of three American experts – a psychiatrist, a sociologist, and a clinical psychologist. I am not speaking now of their individual competencies. They are all highly qualified in their own professional domains, and I hold the sociologist, whose work I know and respect, in high regard. I am speaking of the ways in which practices common to specialties like psychiatry, clinical psychology, sociology, and others of the social and behavioral sciences can be put to work in circumstances like these. The problem I am drawing attention to, then, has to do with disciplines, not persons.

The clinical psychologist visited the Marshall Islands for several

days and conducted interviews about their mental health status with a number of persons who were then living on Utrik or who once lived there and now reside in Majuro. The psychiatrist and the sociologist were careful to note that they knew very little about the Marshall Islands, and have never visited the place. All three, however, signed a statement that the interviews of the psychologist “do not show the clinical signs or symptoms of depression or anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder,” leading them to conclude that there are “no diagnosable psychiatric conditions” to be found among the people of Utrik and “no evidence of a diagnosable mental illness.” None.

How could that be so? As is standard procedure elsewhere, the questions asked of the people of Utrik about their mental status alluded largely to present moods. Are you able to concentrate? Do you enjoy being with your family? Do you startle easily? Do you sleep well? The people of Utrik, apparently, passed those tests with flying colors. Not a one of them failed. But what then should we conclude about the person who said to the psychologist in one of those interviews: “I have a condition of being sad all the time, and it’s getting worse. I feel sad when I think about my relatives who have died and knowing that I may not have long to live. I know that I am just waiting for my time because I have so much radiation in me. I know that I will die soon because someone that has radiation in their body will die because inside the body is contamination”? Or the person who said “my constant fear gives me very little interest in most of the things I do”?

They do not have trouble concentrating. They enjoy their families and friends (in how many languages would a direct translation of the word *enjoy* be the right way to get across what the question is probing for?). They sleep soundly. They do not startle easily (whatever that may mean to Marshallese). After all, they have been living with their problems for half a century. But one of them testifies that he is sad most of the time, that his body is full of radiation, and that he is doomed to meet an early death; and the other testifies that she lives in constant fear and has little interest in things. If those comments do not qualify as evidence of *something* profoundly amiss with the people who utter them, then the problem lies with the professional disciplines in which the ques-

tions were formulated at least as much as with the judgment of the persons who evaluated the answers.

I have no license for saying this – literally or figuratively – but I have to suppose that this is faulty psychiatry and faulty psychology. It is certainly troubles me as sociology. Are we suggesting that we can learn from the transcript of a brief interview conducted in another language half a world away whether a fellow human is suffering from mental illness? There is a measure of presumption built into that way of thinking that we all need to reflect on – and I mean all of us who venture out into distant fields as well as those of us who read reports at home.

Part of my reason for feeling so strongly about this is that I learned about it while in the Marshall Islands, which is, in its own way, a stark instance of what American imperialism can look like. And it fit. We Americans have always acted as if we know better than people elsewhere how they should dress, what they should eat, how they should make a living, how they should relate to one another, what language they should use to speak truths in, what deity they should worship, and how they should go about it. And now we can add that American specialists have the ability to diagnose the contents of their minds without any knowledge of their culture or language or ways of thinking.

Winter 2006

In the middle of December 2006, the Nuclear Claims Tribunal issued a Memorandum of Decision and Order awarding the people of Utrik a rounded \$137 million for consequential damages resulting from the Bravo shot. Roughly \$45 million of that sum was for “emotional distress.” The fund, of course, has been depleted for a very long time, so no money will come to Utrik unless the Congress of the United States votes in an act of almost miraculous charity to cover the amount.

But a great thing has happened anyway. A community of people who were damaged to the core by an incomprehensible force, and who were systematically misled when they sought redress, has been informed by a tribunal representing the just opinion of humankind that they have been right all along.